

Running Header: CAPTAINCY IN PROFESSIONAL RUGBY

**Professional rugby coaches' perceptions of the role of the team captain**

Stewart T. Cotterill

AECC University College / University of Winchester

Richard Cheetham

University of Winchester

Katrien Fransen

KU Leuven

**Author note**

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Stewart Cotterill PhD, School of Psychology, Sport and Physical Activity, AECC University College, Bournemouth, BH5 2DF, United Kingdom. Tel: +44(0)1202-436363. E-mail: scotterill@aecc.ac.uk.

**Abstract**

The aim of this study was to explore the lived experiences of the coach in relation to the perceived function of captains in professional rugby union. Participants were eight elite male rugby coaches purposefully sampled for this study. Participants were interviewed individually to gain an understanding of their experiences and perceptions of the role of the captain. The data were thematically analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Ten super-ordinate themes emerged in the study: types of captain, captain development, challenges, captain's role, off field responsibilities, nature of the job, selection, cultural architects, coach-captain relationship, and key attributes. Results suggest coaches view the captain as an extension of their authority in the team, leadership groups are increasingly important to support captains, and that the criteria for the selection of captains is still vague. As a result, future research should explore the development of specific evidence-based approaches to captain selection and development.

*Keywords:* leadership role, selection, development, coach-captain relationship

# **Professional rugby coaches' perceptions of the role of the team captain**

In recent years there has been increased interest within sports leadership research in the role of the athlete leader, and in particular, in the position of captain within the team (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016). Despite this advancement of knowledge relating to athlete leadership in sport, there is still limited research exploring captaincy in elite and professional sport domains (Cotterill & Cheetham, 2017). This is especially peculiar in light of the historical importance that has been assigned to the team captain and his or her impact on the team they are leading (Cotterill, 2016). Though some studies have considered the nature of the captain's position and the role that they fulfil, no studies have really considered the interaction between the captain and the coach. This is strange as in many professional sports the captain is selected by and 'managed' by the coach. This fact suggests that the perceptions of the professional coach will go a long way in determining the nature of the captain's position in the team and the associated expectations placed upon them as a leader. This could, in turn, impact who is selected as captain and the skills, knowledge and expertise that is deemed essential for the position. Though perceived to be a core part of the leadership of any sports team until recently the role of captain has received limited empirical investigation. Although good captaincy can have a marked impact upon performance (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016), a deeper insight into the role and the function of the captain has remained elusive. In particular, at the professional level how key decision-makers (such as the coach) view the position, what function it fulfils, and who has the right characteristics to undertake the position.

Captains in sporting teams form part of a group of 'athlete leaders' amongst their peers. Athlete leadership has been operationally defined as "an athlete occupying a formal or informal role within a team who influences a group of team members to achieve a common goal" (Loughead, Hardy & Eys, 2006, p. 144). Building upon this definition, the captain can

1 be characterized as a specific formal role within the team. More recent categorizations of  
2 leadership within sports teams have distinguished between four different leadership roles  
3 that athletes can occupy in the team: task, social (Slater, 1955), external (Loughead et al.,  
4 2006) and motivational (Fransen et al., 2014). Specifically, the *task leader* gives teammates  
5 tactical advice and adjust them when necessary; the *motivational leader* encourages  
6 teammates to perform at their best; the *social leader* develops a positive team atmosphere;  
7 and the *external leader* represents the team towards external parties such as club  
8 management, media or sponsors (Fransen et al., 2014). It has long been assumed that the  
9 captain is a key source of these different leadership needs within the team (Cotterill &  
10 Fransen, 2016). Though many of these athlete leadership roles are emergent within the  
11 group, at the professional sport level, the position of captain is often appointed by the club,  
12 and often specifically by the coach (Cotterill, 2013).

13         One of the first studies that sought to understand the function of the team captain and  
14 the link with the coach was undertaken by Mosher (1979) who, when considering the sport  
15 of volleyball outlined three specific responsibilities for the captain: (1) to be a link between  
16 the coach and the team; (2) to lead team activities; and (3) to represent the team at events  
17 and meetings. This articulation of the captain's role suggests that a core function is to act as  
18 a link between two separate entities: the coach and the team. In terms of specific duties,  
19 Mosher (1979) suggested that captains facilitate coach-team communication; lead by  
20 example; help the coach in team planning; and should behave in a professional manner  
21 before, during and after the game. Adopting a slightly different focus, Dupuis, Bloom, and  
22 Loughead (2006) focused on the traits that captains appeared to share in a study of six  
23 former Canadian male university ice hockey players. The reported traits included: being  
24 effective communicators, remaining positive, and controlling their emotions. In recent years  
25 there has been a renewed focus in seeking to understand the position of the sports captain

1 and the specific function they fulfil for the team and/or coach. For example, Cotterill and  
2 Cheetham (2017) interviewed eight male professional rugby union captains and reported  
3 that the core aspects of the captain's position in the team included: on pitch decision-  
4 making, acting as a player representative, being a motivator, media liaison, embodying the  
5 team culture, mentoring young players, and providing feedback to the coach. Smith and  
6 Cotterill (In press) interviewed professional cricket captains, reporting that the position was  
7 perceived to involve planning; supporting players; communicating with players, coaches  
8 and management; demonstrating discipline; working with the media; working with the  
9 coach; making tactical decisions; and team selection. Finally, Camiré (2016) explored the  
10 benefits and challenges of captaincy in the national hockey league (NHL) conducting an  
11 interview with a current NHL captain; reporting that a core aspect of the role was being the  
12 communication bridge between the coach and the players.

13         Though many authors have assumed the importance of the sports captain universally  
14 this has not been the case. For example, Fransen et al. (2014) reported that much of the  
15 athlete leadership identified in their multi-sport study was not provided by the captain.  
16 Fransen and colleagues conducted a survey of 4,451 team sport players drawn from nine  
17 different sports. The results suggested that almost half of all participants felt the captain did  
18 not fulfil any of the four athlete leadership roles (i.e., task, motivational, social, and external  
19 leadership) in the team. However, these outcomes could be interpreted differently.  
20 Specifically, that these teams did not appoint the most appropriate captain. Also, the nature  
21 of the role that the captain fulfils appears to be different in different sports, a fact that could  
22 have compounded the results in this study.

23         Indeed, differences in the function of the captain have been highlighted across  
24 different sports and it has also been suggested that there could be differences in the nature of  
25 the captain's position at different levels in the same sport (Cotterill & Cheetham, 2017). As

1 a result, it is important that studies explore the nature of the position of the captain within  
2 specific sports and at specific levels (e.g., professional) and don't seek to combine a more  
3 diverse range of contexts within the same study.

4 Questions have also been raised regarding the process that many coaches adopt in  
5 selecting the right player for the position of captain. For example, in some sports the captain  
6 has often been selected based upon one's individual performance level or one's technical  
7 ability, rather than based upon their leadership ability (Yukelson, Weinberg, Richardson, &  
8 Jackson, 1983). Also, the position the player occupies on the pitch/court has also been  
9 highlighted as an important determining factor in captain selection (Fransen, Haslam,  
10 Mallett, Steffens, Peters, & Boen, 2016; Lee, Partridge, & Coburn, 1983; Melnick & Loy,  
11 1996). The general rationale for this approach is that occupying a central position within the  
12 team could maximize the individuals' ability to communicate the coaches' core messages to  
13 the team and to 'lead by example' (Fransen et al., 2016). However, at the same time a lack  
14 of clarity regarding the function of the captain has also been reported (Cotterill & Fransen,  
15 2016). Though there is some research exploring the nature of expectations and demands of  
16 the captain in youth sport (Blanton, Sturges, & Gould, 2014; Gould & Voelker, 2010), this  
17 line of inquiry has not been extended to the professional/elite level. In summary, there is  
18 still a lack of understanding about the function and role of captains in sport. In particular,  
19 with specific sports and at specific levels, and especially the elite level. Finally, the  
20 perceptions of the coach have yet to be truly considered.

21 As a result, the aim of this exploratory study was to explore the coaches' perceptions  
22 of the role of captain based upon their experiences of working with and recruiting captains  
23 at the professional level within the sport of rugby union.

## 24 **Method**

### 25 **Design**

Similar to the approach adopted by Cotterill and Cheetham (2017) in professional rugby union the current study adopted an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA approach). This approach has broad application within the field of psychology, and increasingly within sport psychology (Palmer, Larkin, De Visser, & Fadden, 2010). IPA as an approach is best suited to forms of data collection that invite participants to articulate stories, thoughts, and feelings about their experiences of specific phenomena (Smith, 2004). This particular approach is systematic in its procedures, while at the same time not being a prescriptive methodology and allowing for individuality and flexibility in the approach adopted (Cope, 2011). The approach offers a detailed analysis of the personal accounts of participants followed by a presentation and discussion of the generic experiential themes that is typically paired with the researcher's own interpretation. In the current study the IPA approach was adopted to understand the particular experiences of the coaches relating to captaincy in the context of professional rugby union.

Ethical approval for the study was gained via the University Ethics Committee at the Institution where the first two authors were resident at the time of the study. All of the participants opted to take part in the study by giving their informed consent.

### **Participants**

The current study followed Smith and Osborn's (2015) guidance for IPA studies and the purposeful selection of a homogenous sample. Participants were selected based upon their experience as elite (professional) rugby coaches. Specifically, participants were recruited from clubs in the English Premier League (elite national professional league), based in the UK through personal contact. There were eight male participants, on average 38 years old (ranging between 32 to 38 years old) and on average six years of experience in coaching at the elite level in professional rugby (ranging between 3 and 12 years of experience).

## **Procedure**

The participants were interviewed to gain an insight into their lived experiences as a coach, particularly in relation to the role of captain in professional rugby union. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore the participant's narrative and experiences. The use of semi-structured interviews has been outlined to be a core data collection tool for IPA studies (Smith & Osborn, 2015). The researchers developed a specific interview schedule for the study but this was used to guide rather than dictate the flow of the interviews. This approach is consistent with the phenomenological approach where the participants are considered the "experts" and it is the meanings that they associate with their experiences that is of interest to the researcher (Smith 1996). The specific process for developing the interview schedule adhered to a four-step approach developed by Smith and Osborn (2015). This approach suggested that the researchers: (a) think about a broad range of issues; (b) put these topics in the most appropriate sequence; (c) think of appropriate questions relating to these areas; (d) and think about possible probes and prompts. Examples of interview questions included as part of the interview schedule: "In your opinion what functions do captains fulfil for rugby teams?"; "In your experience how have captains been selected?"; "How important is the relationship between the coach and the captain?" All interviews were recorded using a digital data recorder and transcribed verbatim to produce an accurate record of the conversations that took place. The interviews lasted between 45 and 85 minutes.

## **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed using IPA. Through this process the researchers engaged in an "interpretative relationship with the transcript" (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p. 64). All transcripts were read a number of times so the researcher could become familiar with each participant's account. As this process continued initial notes were made in the left-hand margin annotating anything identified as interesting or significant. As this process continued



1 the right-hand margin was used to document emerging theme titles. These initial notes were  
2 then transformed into concise phrases capturing the qualities of the points annotated. The  
3 next step involved the researchers making connections between the emergent themes and  
4 researcher interpretations (Smith & Osborn, 2015). As these connections were made a  
5 clustering of themes emerged. Checks were made with the original transcripts to make sure  
6 connections still worked with the primary source materials. This step led to the development  
7 of a coherent table of themes. Once the transcripts had been analyzed by this interpretative  
8 process a final table of super-ordinate themes was constructed. These super-ordinate themes  
9 were then translated into a narrative account.

10 **Quality of the qualitative data.** A non-foundational approach to judging the quality  
11 of qualitative enquiry was adopted in the current study (Smith & Caddick, 2012). The  
12 specific criteria for judging the quality of this research included: the contribution it makes to  
13 the field, its coherence, sincerity, resonance and credibility (Tracy, 2010). A key aim of this  
14 study was to co-construct knowledge that contributes to the understanding of the coaches'  
15 perspective on the role of and function of the captain and to understand the nature of the  
16 coach-captain interactions, and to report substantive findings. This substantive report of the  
17 findings was also achieved by using detailed quotes from a number of specific participants  
18 when creating the results section of this manuscript. The coherence of the findings in this  
19 study was achieved via discussions with a critical friend (Didymus, 2017), who was utilized  
20 to discuss matters such as sampling and data analyses. In this context a critical friend is used  
21 to provide an objective voice in the design and implementation of the study. In terms of  
22 sincerity and the truthfulness of the data, it appears that rapport was effectively gained  
23 because participants spoke openly and fully about their experiences. Evidence of this  
24 included the length of the interviews, and that participants mentioned players by name, thus  
25 suggesting that they trusted the researchers not to disclose any such confidential information

about their role working in an elite and public environment. Regarding resonance, the core aim was to produce findings that are valuable in professional rugby contexts (Tracy, 2010). The credibility of the data was enhanced by spending further time with the participants before commencing the interviews, by sharing each practitioner's interview transcription with that individual to encourage reflection and dialogue about the data that had been deemed most pertinent, through maintaining a reflexive journal and an audit trail of the research, and by having a critical friend to scrutinize and discuss pertinent matters.

## Results

The IPA analysis of these data highlighted ten super-ordinate themes as well as 50 sub-ordinate themes. These super-ordinate themes (see Table 1) include types of captain, development, best captains, challenges, role, nature of the job, selection, cultural architects, coach-captain relationship, and key attributes.

### Types of Captain

The first point raised by the participants in this study related to their lived experiences highlighting that there are different types of captain. For example, participant 2 suggested that:

“There are two types of captains; First, the kind that leads by example; the sort of guy that makes sure everyone wants to follow him on the pitch. The other type of captain really focuses on making sure everything is good off the pitch, that the lads are all ok”.

This view of the participants in this study implies that the ability to lead by example and the ability to develop good interpersonal relationships are central aspects of what coaches view the role of the captain to be.

### Captain Development

1       The second major theme to emerge in the current study related to the way that  
2 captains develop/are developed within the sport. There was a strong feeling amongst the  
3 participants in this study that in the main this development was still very adhoc. For  
4 example, coach participant 3 reflected that:

5       “I don’t necessarily think there’s a formal process to it. I think players can learn from  
6 others, so the younger guys can learn from the captains they have, just learning, in  
7 terms of their professionalism, the way they conduct themselves and act around the  
8 club.”

9       This notion of players learning from the captains they have experienced has previously been  
10 highlighted as the main development option in professional sports including rugby union  
11 and professional cricket. However, this perspective is also concerning in that it leaves a lot  
12 to chance regarding whether an individual who is promoted to captain has had appropriate  
13 (positive or negative) role models to learn the required skills.

14       What was more encouraging in the current study were the number of participants  
15 who highlighted the growing use of leadership groups, in which more players rather than  
16 just one team captain share the leadership responsibilities. Participants viewed this shared  
17 leadership as a way to provide greater leadership to the team, and crucially to provide a  
18 more focused environment in which the leadership skills and knowledge of future leaders  
19 can be developed. For example, coach participant 2 highlighted:

20       I think nowadays you try and have a leadership group, which is probably five or six  
21 players, and you’d sort of maybe earmark a couple of guys within that. So you would  
22 have your captain in that group, then underneath him, players who are learning,  
23 learning how to make that transition so that they’re not at the forefront of it. They  
24 have got a say in the team decision-making process and you respect what they’re  
25 saying, and they as a group, meet with the coaches every week. Ultimately, the buck

1 stops with the captain, but it's trying to drip-feed a bit of leadership stuff into them  
2 and help them make that transition so that one day if they do become a captain they're  
3 pretty comfortable how things works and you get the best out of them."

4 Some of the participating coaches also viewed the leadership group as a way to support the  
5 captain and to spread the leadership load:

6 He [the captain] surrounded himself with a decent group. So there's another guy there  
7 who's a back rower, who's probably captain material as well, so he's a good standard,  
8 you know he knows the game, He's then got another in there who he used play with a  
9 couple of years ago at scrum-half, so again he's got good standards and is a bit more  
10 intuitive, so the captain is probably not tough enough at times so the scrum-half helps  
11 him out, and he will sort of try and drive a few standards, and then the other player, he  
12 sort of helps him out.

13 As highlighted in this quote, the presence of specific social support from within the team  
14 can help the captain and spread the leadership load.

### 15 **Challenges**

16 The coaches in this study highlighted a number of key challenges they felt captains  
17 faced, the first of which was the transition from being a player to a player-captain. For  
18 example, participant 6 reflected that:

19 It is a big shift going from player to captain, I think the captain has got to be willing  
20 and able to pull people out, and have a word, if you're the captain, I think you've got a  
21 responsibility to push the club in the right direction, you know both on field and off  
22 field, so that you making sure peoples' wives and stuff are feeling comfortable, and  
23 that you can pull players up who are not meeting the standards.

24 This challenge of transitioning from a player to the captain was highlighted by a number of  
25 the coaches in the current study.

## 1 **Captain's Role**

2           The participants, based on their lived experiences, identified some key aspects of the  
3 role of captain including: fostering enjoyment, acting as the voice of the players, providing  
4 feedback on training, and acting as a role-model for the club. Fostering enjoyment and  
5 helping to drive the motivation of the team was consistently highlighted by some of the  
6 participants. For example, participant 3 reflected:

7           “I think he [the captain] is trying to make them [the players] relaxed and enjoy their  
8 environment, that hopefully brings the best out of people, and I think, being happy and  
9 energetic at work, then you’re sort of gets the best out of them.”

10 Participant 3 suggested that the captain was seen as: “the focal point, you know in terms of  
11 he can get them to think the same way and can drive the same standards for the team and  
12 their performance.” This view also supported the point made by participant 4 stating “I think  
13 in this environment the challenge is to be a role model, and to exhibit the characteristics that  
14 the clubs are trying to develop, in terms of respect, hard work, all that stuff”.

15           Another core aspect of the role of the captain, as perceived by the coaches, was to  
16 act as the voice of the players. In the current study this view was reinforced by participant 2  
17 who stated: “He’s got to be two things, so from a playing point of view he’s got to lead by  
18 example, then also he has got to be the voice of the players”. Participant 2 further clarified  
19 that the captain in particular needs to be the voice of players when it comes to interacting  
20 with the coaching/management staff at the club:

21           “He’s also got to be a guy that feeds back in terms of training, in terms of what he  
22 thinks is going well, you know what areas the players want to work on the feedback  
23 on your actual sessions, whether or not you’re delivering what you’re trying to  
24 deliver. But initially it needs someone that’s got a bit of experience, but is confident  
25 enough to voice an opinion and make sure you listen to them really.”

1 It is interesting that this perspective on the captain emphasized a number of  
2 functions that supported the coach rather than directly providing leadership and decision-  
3 making for the team.

#### 4 **Off Field Responsibilities**

5 The elite coaches who were the participants in the current study further highlighted that  
6 captains generally had a range of off-field responsibilities as well. For example, participant  
7 1 suggested that these off field roles can add pressure to the captain:

8 “I think there are off field pressures too, there are events and functions that the captain  
9 has to attend and all that, and I think you have to look at the bloke and so your well-  
10 rounded bloke, or woman, but in my world it’s a bloke, and a well-rounded bloke,  
11 you’ve got to look at how they can cope with it and would they be able to embrace the  
12 challenge.”

13 The fact that captains are expected to also fulfill off field responsibilities, on top of their job  
14 on the field is also reflected in the four leadership roles that are identified as being essential  
15 for the team’s performance, namely two roles on the field (i.e., task and motivational  
16 leader), but also two roles off the field (i.e., social and external leader). Although it is  
17 interesting to note that it has been suggested that it is more likely that these roles will be  
18 dispersed within the team, whereas the coaches in this study have highlighted task,  
19 motivational and external leadership as core parts of the captain’s role.

#### 20 **Nature of the Job**

21 A couple of crucial factors were highlighted as part of the ‘nature of the job’ theme. The  
22 ability of captains to separate their playing form from their role as captain was seen as an  
23 important aspect. For example, participant 4 suggested:

24 “It’s getting that balance right, and there are times when, the captain, is not playing  
25 well, but they can’t let that affect the way they are with the group, the decisions they

1 make, and the way they are with the coaches and I think that's pretty tough to deal  
2 with at times. The better captains can cope with that and don't let their form affect  
3 how they are as a captain".

4 There was also a view the current study that the nature of the role also changed and evolved  
5 over time. In highlighting this point participant 1 stated:

6 "I think captaincy is an evolving thing, so I think what we would have said would be  
7 good captaincy when I was playing would not be potentially seen as good captaincy  
8 now, and I also think they are changed by environments because each environment I  
9 suppose from a club point of view is going to be unique. And whilst there could be  
10 some common traits there's also going to be some kind of very environmental and  
11 situational traits."

## 12 **Selection**

13 With respect to how the coaches selected the most appropriate captain, coaches  
14 admitted that they lacked a clear process in terms of the requirements for the job, and as a  
15 result how they selected their captain. They did however have a process for identifying the  
16 most appropriate candidate. The ability to lead by example was a common response often  
17 underpinned the coaches' decision. Participant 5 illustrated this view as follows:

18 "Well I suppose all captains are different, you know you've got your talkative guys  
19 who speak a lot and try and inspire by their words and influence, and then you've got  
20 those who lead by what they do. I like guys that say something, then they go out there  
21 and lead by example with their actions kind of thing."

22 In addition, participant 8 highlighted the importance for the captain to be trusted by his  
23 teammates:

24 "I'm absolutely looking for the bloke who the boys trust and you know that is, I don't  
25 necessarily mean he goes out for coffee with them all the time, or you know he's one

of the lads, it's just the guy that I know they trust, and it's got to be the guy who's going to do the job every week. You know that's crucial."

### **Cultural architects**

The importance of the team's culture was also highlighted by the coach participants. Indeed, though the captain was seen as a cultural architect embodying the ethos of the team, it was also important for the coaching and support staff to support the culture as well. For example participant 3 stated that:

"We're a really positive coaching team, and a lot of what we do is worked around, based around workrate, so as long as the boys are working hard, then you know we're happy. I think though it is important to get values sorted during pre-season and the players have bought into it. It is also important we buy into the values as well, I think that has made, for whoever has been captain, that we've made their lives a lot easier, and obviously they know that we're fair about, those values."

A particular ideal or challenge outlined by the participants in the current study related to the team environment. There was a feeling that if designed right the performance and team environments had the potential to shape and mold captains of the future. This view was illustrated by participant 1 who suggested:

"Hopefully the environment is naturally breeding captains I suppose for the want of a better word, and hopefully the experience of being in the Championship, the experience of you know, providing it is you know being positive, just you know, just trying to grow as players, you know potentially as people as well."

### **Coach-captain relationship**

There was also a view that ultimately it was crucial for the coach to trust the captain in terms of what they did and how they went about doing it. This point was highlighted by participant 2 who reflected:



1 “I think it also depends on the experience of your captain. I’d say the big thing is, if  
2 the coach has appointed a captain, they have to learn to have the trust in them to  
3 believe in what they’re saying and actually listen to what they’re saying, and at times I  
4 think that can be quite tough for a coach, when a captain turns around and says we  
5 want to work on X and then the coach will work on Y; you’ve got to try and get that  
6 balance right!”

7 The quality of the coach-captain relationship was also highlighted as an important factor  
8 underpinning leadership effectiveness within the team. For example, participant 7 suggested  
9 that:

10 “Yeah I think obviously they have to be truly aligned, I don’t think they have to be  
11 best mates, because I think a coach sometimes needs to be challenged, and the captain  
12 should be able to feel like he should do that.”

13 The ability of the coach and captain to be able to work together has also been highlighted as  
14 important in elite cricket, though this is not necessarily a like-for-like comparison as the  
15 captain in cricket at the elite level is employed at the same level in the organization as the  
16 coach.

### 17 **Key attributes**

18 The participants in the current study outlined a number of key attributes and  
19 characteristics that they felt were important for a successful captain to possess including:  
20 man management skills, mental maturity, a calm head, knowledge of the game, resilience,  
21 and the trust of their fellow players. The ability to connect with and understand other  
22 players was seen as crucial, participants referred to this skill as management as highlighted  
23 by participant 3: “I suppose the other 50 percent is about getting to know people, and just  
24 having a good gauge on the group around you and a good understanding of what makes  
25 them tick.” This perspective was further illustrated by participant 7 who stated:

1 “I think man management is knowing how to deal with different types of players.

2 Also, being able to inspire, and to motivate, so again he [the captain] doesn’t have to

3 be doing these ‘gladiator’ kind of type of speeches, but he has to recognize how to

4 connect with different players, and with the group as a whole.”

5 Maturity (emotional and psychological) was also highlighted as an important asset of a

6 successful captain, an asset that did not necessarily correspond to chronological age. For

7 example, participant 2 stated that:

8 “Some guys are naturally captains at twenty-one and will have that natural born

9 confidence to lead, but then there are other twenty-one, twenty-two year-olds who

10 think they’ve got that and miss the mark by quite a long way, and I think just making

11 people more self-aware, or self-critical maybe, might help.”

12 Having a good knowledge of the game, and being able to use that knowledge to underpin

13 decision-making out on the pitch was highlighted by the participating coaches in the current

14 study as another important factor. This point was highlighted by participant 6 who

15 suggested that:

16 “You probably look at some people to be captains because they’ve got the knowledge

17 of the game and they’ll say “well I know when to kick for points, I know when to put

18 balls in the corner”, are they as robust, you know will they play as many games, will

19 they be in training all the time, you know are they willing to go the extra mile, go the

20 extra yard type of thing, do they, you know do they looked after themselves off the

21 pitch? But the knowledge can be crucial!”

## 22 Discussion

23 The core aim of this study was to explore the coaches’ perceptions of the role of the captain

24 based upon their experiences in professional rugby. A number of perceptions highlighted in

25 the current study support some key aspects of captaincy outlined in other studies. For

example, leading by example has been highlighted across a broad range of leadership domains (Bucci et al., 2012; Holmes, McNeil, & Adorna, 2010), including previously in professional rugby union (Cotterill & Cheetham, 2017), as a core function of formal leadership roles. The challenge of transitioning from a player to the captain has also been highlighted previously by Cotterill and Cheetham (2017) in their study interviewing elite rugby union captains. Reporting that elite rugby union captains felt it was a difficult transition often with little structured support.

Another core aspect of the role of the captain, as perceived by the coaches, was to act as the voice of the players, a perspective that has been highlighted in a range of other studies (e.g., Camiré, 2016; Cotterill, 2016; Cotterill & Cheetham, 2017; Dupuis, et al., 2006). The view that the captain acts as a ‘players’ representative’ has also been highlighted in a number of studies including Cotterill (2016) who reported the importance of this role as part of an athlete leadership development program for elite level cricketers.

The participants in the current study also highlighted that different teams and different environments might need different leadership. This notion of different environments requiring different types of leaders or leadership approaches is not a new concept in sport. Previous research focused on Chelladurai’s (1990) multidimensional model of leadership highlighted the importance of the fit between the leader, the team, and the context. However, Chelladurai’s model was originally developed with coaches in mind (Cotterill, 2013). The importance of the fit between the leader and the team/environment could explain why some captains can successfully transition to another team/environment though others cannot. This perspective further highlights the importance of the context when considering the position of the captain across different sports and at different levels.

Participants in the current study highlighted that an important role of the captain is to lead by example. This view of the captain leading by examples has previously been

1 highlighted in studies that have focused on the perspective of the coach (e.g., Grant &  
2 Cotterill, 2016 who focused on national level hockey captains) as well as those that have  
3 focused on the perspective of the athletes (e.g., Camiré, 2016; Cotterill & Cheetham, 2017).  
4 Previous research also corroborates the importance for a captain to be trusted and respected  
5 by the other team members (Bucci et al., 2012; Dupuis et al., 2006). For example, previous  
6 research revealed that social acceptance in the team was the best predictor of the perceived  
7 leadership quality of athlete leaders (Fransen, Vanbeselaere, De Cuyper, Vande Broek, &  
8 Boen, 2018), and the best leaders tend to appear most central in the team's social  
9 connectedness network (i.e. to have good social relationships with the other team members;  
10 Fransen et al., 2015a). Dirks (2000) even reported that trust in the leader was a direct driver  
11 of the team's performance. Given this importance of team acceptance, there have been  
12 recent calls advocating that the captain should be selected based upon the perception of  
13 his/her teammates, rather than simply having the coach to decide (Fransen, Haslam, et al.,  
14 2017; Fransen et al., 2015b).

15 A number of the personal characteristics highlighted in the current study have been  
16 highlighted in other studies that have focused on the skill set that a successful captain needs  
17 including: man management skills; motivation; tactical knowledge; and leading by example  
18 as the focal point of the team (Callow et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2012).

19 A particular finding in the current study was the importance of social support.  
20 Researchers across a range of psychology domains have highlighted that social support can  
21 have potentially both stress-buffering effects (Raedeke & Smith, 2004) as well as health-  
22 enhancing effects (Haslam, Cruwys, Haslam, Dingle, & Chang, 2016). There is evidence  
23 that social support also moderates the stress-illness relationship (e.g., Sarason, Sarason,  
24 Potter, & Antoni, 1985). The importance of social support for coping with performance  
25 stressors has been noted previously (Rees, Hardy & Freeman, 2007), and the potential

1 stress-buffering effect has been pointed out (Rees & Hardy, 2004). As a result, the  
2 leadership groups highlighted by the participants could also serve to help moderate the  
3 range of stressors impacting upon the captain.

4 An interesting perspective emerging from the current study was the role of the  
5 captain in fostering enjoyment in team mates. There is a lot of evidence to suggest that  
6 enjoyment and happiness are key factors influenced by the athletes' motivation. The Self-  
7 Determination Approach (Deci & Ryan, 1985) postulates that the motivation driven by this  
8 inherent interest and enjoyment of the task itself, also termed intrinsic motivation, is the  
9 purest form of motivation in the spectrum. Within the sports context, it has been shown that  
10 players' intrinsic motivation underpins youth athletes' performance progression (Zuber,  
11 Zibung, & Conzelmann, 2015). Furthermore, athletes with a strong intrinsic motivation are  
12 less likely to drop out from their sport (Jöessaar, Hein, & Hagger, 2011) and ultimately also  
13 perform better than their peers who are less motivated (Fransen, Boen, Vansteenkiste,  
14 Mertens, & Vande Broek, 2017; Gillet, Vallerand, Amoura, & Baldes, 2010). Finally, when  
15 being intrinsically motivated athletes' well-being is maximized and they are more satisfied  
16 with life in general (Martin-Albo, Nunez, Dominguez, Leon, & Tomas, 2012). However,  
17 though there is evidence in sporting contexts most of these studies use youth players as  
18 participants, this study is one of the first, to our knowledge, which reflects the importance of  
19 fostering enjoyment within professional sport.

20 One very interesting finding in the current study was the perception of the coaches  
21 that the captain was an extension of their authority on the pitch. This perspective is contrary  
22 to the perceived function of the captain in rugby union from the perspective of the players  
23 (Cotterill & Cheetham, 2017), and in professional cricket (Smith & Cotterill, In-press). The  
24 coach perspective adopted in the current study was consistent though with the coaches'

viewpoint, as reported in men's field hockey (Grant & Cotterill, 2016), where the coach very much saw the team as theirs, with the captain acting as a subordinate. The findings in the current study also contradict the recommendations of Fransen and colleagues (2014) who suggested that it is more likely that leadership roles (task, motivational, social, external) will be dispersed within the team. The coaches in this study have highlighted task, motivational and external leadership as core parts of the captain's role.

The viewpoint of the captain as cultural architect aligns with the developing Social Identity Approach to Leadership (Haslam, Reicher, & Platow, 2011). This theory asserts that leaders are more effective to the extent that they are seen as 'one of us', embodying the core values (identity prototypicality), as 'crafting a sense of us' (identity entrepreneurship), as 'doing it for us' (identity advancement), and as 'embedding a sense of us' (identity impresarioship). Each of these core assets characteristic of a cultural architect have been demonstrated to be essential for the captain to be perceived as a good leader (Steffen et al., 2014).

### Conclusion

In seeking to better understand the perceptions of elite rugby union coaches relating to the purpose of the captain a number of interesting perspectives emerged. First, based on their past experiences the coaches in this study viewed the purpose of the captain be to lead by example, motivate, and act as a player representative. Second, that even at this professional level there was a lack of clarity about how to develop captains. Some clubs operated a leadership group structure that worked well in supporting the captain, while some coaches suggested that the main source of leadership development was simply based on a player's previous experience of being captained. Third, social support for the captain was highlighted as a fundamental requirement for success, as was the ability of the captain to

1 foster an environment in which players gained satisfaction from participation which  
2 increased intrinsic motivation. While this outcome has previously been reported in youth  
3 sport this is the first time that we are aware of that it has been reported in professional sport.  
4 Fourth, an important point was made regarding the importance of the 'fit' between the  
5 captain and the environment/team. This perspective suggests that a number of aspects of  
6 successful captaincy are context specific. Fifth, coaches in the present study acknowledged  
7 a lack of clarity regarding the criteria and process for appointing new captains at their clubs,  
8 something that has been reported in a number of other studies at different levels. Finally, the  
9 current study supported the Social Identity Approach to Leadership (Haslam et al., 2011),  
10 suggesting that the captains were viewed to be more effective if they were seen as 'one of  
11 us'.

12 Future research needs to explore the nature of captaincy and the position of the  
13 captain in different sports and at different levels within the same sport. The current study  
14 has also highlighted differences in the perceptions of the coach compared to the perceptions  
15 of the captains (Cotterill & Cheetham, 2017) in rugby union. As a result greater  
16 investigation of the differing perceptions of coaches and captains is required to try and  
17 develop a consensus of the role of the captain. From an applied perspective this finding  
18 suggests it is crucial to facilitate dialogue between coaches and captains regarding the nature  
19 of the position, the skills and attributes that are required, and the nature of the pivotal coach-  
20 captain relationship.

## References

- Blanton, J. E., Sturges, A. J., & Gould, D. (2014). Lessons learned from a leadership development club for high school athletes. *Journal of Sport Psychology in Action*, 5(1), 1-13. doi: 10.1080/21520704.2013.848827
- Bucci, J., Bloom, G. A., Loughhead, T. M., & Caron, J. G. (2012). Ice hockey coaches' perceptions of athlete leadership. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 24(3), 243-259. doi: 10.1080/10413200.2011.636416
- Callow, N., Smith M. J., Hardy, L., Arthur, C. A., & Hardy, J. (2009). Measurement of Transformational Leadership and its Relationship with Team Cohesion and Performance Level, *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 21 (4), 395-412. doi: 10.1080/10413200903204754
- Camiré, M. (2016). Benefits, pressures, and challenges of leadership and captaincy in the national hockey league. *Journal of Clinical Sport Psychology*, 10, 118-136. doi: 10.1123/jcsp.2015-0033
- Carron, A. V., & Eys, M. A. (2012). *Group dynamics in sport* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Morgantown, WV: Fitness Information Technology.
- Chelladurai, P. (1990). Leadership in sports: A review. *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 21(4), 328–354.
- Cope, J. (2011). Entrepreneurial learning from failure: An interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Journal of Business Venturing*, 26(6), 604-623. doi: 10.1016/j.jbusvent.2010.06.002
- Cotterill, S. T. (2013). *Team psychology in sports: Theory and practice*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Cotterill, S. T. (2016). Developing leadership skills in sport: A case study of elite cricketers. *Case Studies in Sport and Exercise Psychology*. doi:10.1123/CSSEP.2016-0004



- 1 Cotterill, S. T., & Cheetham, R. (2017). The Experiences of Captaincy in Professional  
2 Sport: The Case of Elite Professional Rugby. *European Journal of Sport Science*,  
3 17(2), 215-221. doi: 10.1080/17461391.2016.1245788
- 4 Cotterill, S. T., & Fransen, K. (2016). Leadership in team sports: Current understanding and  
5 future directions. *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology*. 9(1), 116-  
6 133. doi:10.1080/1750984X.2015.1124443
- 7 Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human*  
8 *behavior*. New York: Plenum.
- 9 Didymus, F. F. (2017). Olympic and international level sports coaches' experiences of  
10 stressors, appraisals, and coping. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*,  
11 9(2), 214-232. doi: 10.1080/2159676X.2016.1261364
- 12 Dirks, K. T. (2000). Trust in leadership and team performance: Evidence from NCAA  
13 basketball. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 85(6), 1004-1012.
- 14 Dupuis, M., Bloom, G. A., & Loughhead, T. M. (2006). Team captains' perceptions of  
15 athlete leadership. *Journal of Sport Behaviour*, 29(1), 60-78.
- 16 Fransen, K., Boen, F., Vansteenkiste, M., Mertens, N., & Vande Broek, G. (2017). The  
17 power of competence support: The impact of coaches and athlete leaders on intrinsic  
18 motivation and performance. *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine and Science in*  
19 *Sports*. In press. doi: 10.1111/sms.12950
- 20 Fransen K, Haslam S. A., Mallett C. J., Steffens N. K., Peters K, & Boen, F. (2016).  
21 Leading from the Centre: A Comprehensive Examination of the Relationship  
22 between Central Playing Positions and Leadership in Sport. *PLoS ONE* 11(12):  
23 e0168150. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0168150
- 24 Fransen, K., Van Puyenbroeck, S., Loughhead, T. M., Vanbeselaere, N., de Cuyper, B.,  
25 Vande Broek, G., & Boen, F. (2015a). The art of athlete leadership: Identifying high-

quality leadership at the individual and team level through Social Network Analysis.

*Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 37(3), 274-290. doi: 10.1123/jsep.2014-

0259

Fransen, K., Puyenbroeck, S., Loughead, T. M., Vanbeselaere, N., De Cuyper, B., Vande

Broek, G., & Boen, F. (2015b). Who takes the lead? Social network analysis as

pioneering tool to investigate shared leadership within sports teams. *Social*

*Networks*, 43, 28-38. doi: 10.1016/j.socnet.2015.04.003

Fransen, K., Vanbeselare, N., De Cuyper, B., Vande Broek, G., & Boen, F. (2014). The

myth of the team captain as principal leader: Extending the athlete leadership

classification within sport teams. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, 32(14), 1389-1397.

doi: 10.1080/02640414.2014.891291

Fransen, K., Vanbeselaere, N., De Cuyper, B., Vande Broek, G., & Boen, F. (2018). When

is a leader considered as a good leader? Perceived impact on teammates' confidence

and social acceptance as key ingredients. *International Journal of Psychology*

*Research*, 12(1). Online.

Gillet, N., Vallerand, R. J., Amoura, S., & Baldes, B. (2010). Influence of coaches'

autonomy support on athletes' motivation and sport performance: A test of the

hierarchical model of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. *Psychology of Sport and*

*Exercise*, 11(2), 155-161. doi:10.1016/j.psychsport.2009.10.004

Gould, D., & Voelker, D. K. (2010). Youth sport leadership development: Leveraging the

sports captaincy experience. *Journal of Sport Psychology in Action*, 1(1), 1-14. doi:

10.1080/21520704.2010.497695

Grant, J., & Cotterill, S. T. 2016). An exploration of the role of the captain in field hockey:

The coaches' perspective. *Proceedings of the Association for Applied Sport*

*Psychology*, Phoenix, USA.

- 1 Haslam, S. A., Reicher, S. D., & Platow, M. J. (2011). *The new psychology of leadership:*  
2 *Identity, influence and power*. New York: Psychology Press.
- 3 Haslam, C., Cruwys, T., Haslam, S. A., Dingle, G. A., & Chang, M. X.-L. (2016). Groups 4  
4 Health: Evidence that a social-identity intervention that builds and strengthens social  
5 group membership improves mental health. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 194, 188-  
6 195. doi:10.1016/j.jad.2016.01.010
- 7 Holmes, R. M., McNeil, M., & Adorna, P. (2010). Student athletes' perceptions of formal  
8 and informal team leaders. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 33(4), 442-465.
- 9 Jõesaar, H., Hein, V., & Hagger, M. S. (2011). Peer influence on young athletes' need  
10 satisfaction, intrinsic motivation and persistence in sport: A 12-month prospective  
11 study. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 12(5), 500-508.  
12 doi:10.1016/j.psychsport.2011.04.005
- 13 Lee, M. J., Partridge, T. R., & Coburn, T. (1983). Influence of team structure in determining  
14 leadership function in football. *Journal of Sport Behaviour*, 6(2), 59-66.
- 15 Loughhead, T. M., Hardy, J., & Eys, M. A. (2006). The nature of athlete leadership. *Journal*  
16 *of Sport Behavior*, 29(2), 142-158.
- 17 Martin-Albo, J., Nunez, J. L., Dominguez, E., Leon, J., & Tomas, J. M. (2012).  
18 Relationships between intrinsic motivation, physical self-concept and satisfaction  
19 with life: A longitudinal study. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, 30(4), 337-347.  
20 doi:10.1080/02640414.2011.649776
- 21 Melnick, M. J., & Loy, J. W. (1996). The effects of formal structure on leadership  
22 recruitment: Analysis of team captaincy among New Zealand provincial rugby teams.  
23 *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 31(1), 91-105. doi:  
24 10.1177/101269029603100105
- 25 Mosher, M. (1979). The team captain. *Volleyball Technical Journal*, 4(1), 7-8.

- 1 Palmer, M., Larkin, M., De Visser, R., & Fadden, G. (2010). Developing an interpretative  
2 phenomenological approach to focus group data. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*,  
3 7(2), 99-121. doi: 10.1080/14780880802513194.
- 4 Raedeke, T. D., & Smith, A. L. (2004). Coping resources and athlete burnout: An  
5 examination of stress mediated and moderation hypotheses. *Journal of Sport and*  
6 *Exercise Psychology*, 26(1), 1-17.
- 7 Railo, W. (1986). *Willing to win*. Utrecht: Amas.
- 8 Rees, T., & Hardy, L. (2004). Matching social support with stressors. Effects on factors  
9 underlying performance in tennis. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 5, 319–337.
- 10 Rees, T., Hardy, L., & Freeman, P. (2007). Stressors, social support, and effects upon  
11 performance in golf. *Journal of Sport Science*, 25, 33-42. doi:  
12 10.1080/02640410600702974
- 13 Sarason, I. G., Sarason, B. R., Potter, E. H., & Antoni, M.H. (1985). Life events, social  
14 support, and illness. *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 47, 156-163.
- 15 Slater, P. E. (1955). Role differentiation in small groups. *American Sociological Review*,  
16 20(3), 300-310. doi: 10.2307/2087389
- 17 Smith, B., & Caddick, N., (2012). Qualitative methods in sport: a concise overview for  
18 guiding social scientific sport research. *Asia Pacific Journal of Sport and Social*  
19 *Science*, 1 (1), 60–73. doi: 10.1080/21640599.2012.701373
- 20 Smith, M. J., Arthur, C. A., Hardy, J. T., Callow, N. & Williams, D. (2013). Transformational  
21 leadership and task cohesion in sport: The mediating role of intra-team communication.  
22 *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 14(2), 249-257.
- 23 Smith, J. A. (1996). Beyond the divide between cognition and discourse: Using interpretive  
24 phenomenological analysis in health psychology. *Psychology and Health*, 11(2), 261-  
25 271. doi:10.1080/08870449608400256

- 1 Smith, J. A. (2004). Reflecting on the development of interpretative phenomenological  
2 analysis and its contribution to qualitative research in psychology, *Qualitative*  
3 *Research in Psychology*, 1(1), 39–54.
- 4 Smith, J. A., & Osborn, M. (2015). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In J. A. Smith  
5 (Ed.), *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods* (3<sup>rd</sup> Edn.) (pp. 51-  
6 80). London: Sage.
- 7 Steffens, N. K., Haslam, S. A., Reicher, S. D., Platow, M. J., Fransen, K., Yang, J., . . .  
8 Boen, F. (2014). Leadership as social identity management: Introducing the Identity  
9 Leadership Inventory (ILI) to assess and validate a four-dimensional model. *The*  
10 *Leadership Quarterly*, 25, 1001-1024. doi:10.1016/j.leaqua.2014.05.002
- 11 Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative Quality: Eight “Big tent” criteria for excellent qualitative  
12 research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(10), 837-851. doi: 10.1.1177/1077800410383121
- 13 Yukelson, D., Weinberg, R., Richardson, P., & Jackson, A. (1983). Interpersonal attraction  
14 and leadership within collegiate sport teams. *Journal of Sport Behaviour*, 6(1), 28-36.
- 15 Zuber, C., Zibung, M., & Conzelmann, A. (2015). Motivational patterns as an instrument  
16 for predicting success in promising young football players. *Journal of Sports*  
17 *Sciences*, 33(2), 160-168. doi:10.1080/02640414.2014.928827

## 1 Table 1. Emergent super and subordinate themes

2

Superordinate theme	Subordinate theme
Types of captain	Lead by example Provide clarity
Captain development	Adhoc (through experience) Leadership group
Challenges	Transition to captaincy Limited development support
Captains role	Inspiring Foster enjoyment Driving/motivating Lead by example Off field responsibilities Voice of the players Input into training Training feedback On pitch decision-making Model for the club (values) Extension of the coach

Off field responsibilities	Pressure adding
	Varying demands
	PR focus
Nature of the job	Evolves over time
	Separates form and leadership
	Environment specific
	Role diversity
	Nation/club conflict
Selection	Group need
	Options/availability
	From leadership group
	Different types
	Regular on the pitch
	Player wants the job
Cultural architects	Embodiment of culture
	Bedrock of the club
	Influential communicators
Coach-captain relationship	Trust captain
	Alignment of values
	Environment to breed captains
	Control issues

## Coach-captain relationship

---

Key attributes

Knowledge of the game

Good bloke

Respected

Trusted

Interpersonal skills (man management)

Regular in team

Resilient

Good communicator

Calm head

Willing to work hard

Players want to follow (them)

Confident in ability

Maturation (not age)